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SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [IZ](#)

SUBJECT: MUTHANNA: MAJOR SHIA PARTIES LIKELY TO DO WELL IN
PROVINCIAL ELECTION; ILLITERACY AND VOTE BUYING REMAIN
CONCERNS

REF: A. 08 BAGHDAD 2089

[B](#). 09 BAGHDAD 102

[C](#). 08 BAGHDAD 3842

[D](#). 08 BAGHDAD 3759

Classified By: PRT Team Leader Brad Lynch for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

(U) This is a PRT Muthanna reporting cable.

[1](#). (C/REL MCFI) Summary: The coming provincial elections in Muthanna are expected to be marked by high voter turnout and a low level of violence. The major political parties will likely do well; the leading candidate for governor is from the ISCI party. The high rate of illiteracy among the adult population, allegations of vote buying, and the unwieldy ballot are major concerns during this election season. In order to partially alleviate the first concern, the PRT is funding, via the Quick Response Fund (QRF), a sizeable voter education program that will help the electorate vote for the candidates of their choosing. These issues notwithstanding, the PRT has high confidence that the election in Muthanna will be viewed as credible. End summary.

Candidate and Voter Registration

[2](#). (C/REL) As seen across Iraq, Muthanna voters have no shortage of options in the January 31 provincial elections. Well over 800 candidates from 50 political party/independent lists will compete for 26 seats. Since the current provincial council has 41 members, many current PC members will not win re-election. Voter registration is reported to be more than 300,000, which would account for about 90 percent of the adult population, but we have not been able to verify the accuracy of registration numbers. Voters will cast their ballots at one of more than 150 voting sites throughout the province, located mostly at schools or other government buildings.

Predicting the Race

[3](#). (C/REL) It is extremely difficult to predict who will win and lose in the upcoming elections, but some PRT sources in Muthanna believe that the major parties -- ISCI, Da'wa, and the Sadrist lists -- will do well. Other trustworthy local sources tell the PRT that religious parties are not likely to fare as well in 2009 as they did in 2005. Most likely is that the leading figures in some religious parties will depart the scene while their parties retain significant support. Neither the governor nor the PC chairman is likely to keep their current positions. Governor Marzook, nominally independent, has fallen out of favor with ISCI, which previously backed him. Abdal Al-Hassen Muhammad al-Dhalimi, the current PC Chairman, is not likely to keep his leadership position because of internal political issues.

[4](#). (C/REL) The Sadrist "Integrity and Construction" list comprises a number of well-known and respected leaders in the

community. The PRT's non-partisan sources believe that their anti-corruption and social welfare platform will resonate with a large segment of the electorate. In addition, Sadrist imams have promoted this and one other Sadrist-aligned list (the "Free Peoples Trend," ref B) during the past several weekly sermons. The PRT expects these parties to do well during the election cycle. In addition to the leading religious parties, some localized lists headlined by a popular political figure will do well. Chief among these are the Middle Euphrates Gathering, headed by Sheikh Hakim Khazal Khashan, and the Iraqi Constitutional Party, headed by Abid al-Razzaq Hamood Beladey, the current mayor of Khidr.

The Next Governor

¶5. (C/REL) Jockeying for position to become the next governor continues in earnest. The clear frontrunner is Latif Hassan Qcontinues in earnest. The clear frontrunner is Latif Hassan al-Hassani (ISCI), the brother of the previous governor who was assassinated in 2007. According to PRT sources, he and ISCI may be using cash and other inducements to solidify support. This has seemingly not sullied his reputation; indeed, contacts generally continue to view Latif as an estimable figure. Sheikh Hakim of the Middle Euphrates Gathering is another candidate for governor, but he probably will not win because his previous struggles against corruption have placed him at odds with other politicians whose support he would need to win. The local Director General for Health is also sometimes mentioned as a gubernatorial candidate.

The Problem of Illiteracy

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¶6. (C/REL) Arguably, the most pressing concern for the election is the very high illiteracy rate in the province. As the PRT previously reported (ref C), more than a third of the adult population (36 percent) in Muthanna is illiterate, according to PC documents. The Governorate Electoral Office (GEO) proposes to alleviate this problem by establishing an 'illiterate room' at each polling location staffed with GEO staff who will help illiterates cast their ballots. They may also allow literate relatives to help illiterate ones, but this is still in discussion. As with all polling locations, monitors may be present to witness the propriety of the process.

¶7. (C/REL) The PRT is providing voter education via a Quick Response Fund (QRF) project in Muthanna, in part to mitigate this issue. Through January 20, a set of NGOs trained and approved by the Iraqi High Electoral Committee (IHEC) has conducted 288 seminars on the voting process in sites across the northern part of the province. The PRT is also funding a variety of IHEC- and GEO-approved written handouts, brochures, posters, and billboards for distribution in the major population centers. While these sessions will touch thousands of voters in the process, it will not be enough to overcome issues of illiteracy and ballot confusion by Election Day.

Election Security

¶8. (C/REL) Election security is chief on the minds of U.S. military, PRT, and local leaders. To that end, representatives from the 4th Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division, the three area PRTs (Dhi Qar, Maysan, and Muthanna), the Iraqi Army, the Iraq Police, and local election officials are meeting every other week to discuss security issues and coordinate activities. In brief, Iraqi Police will guard the more than 150 polling sites across the province, the Iraqi Army will provide perimeter or outer ring security. Among the key leaders with whom the PRT has spoken

in the past several weeks, no one believes that the election will be marked by any appreciable violence (ref D). One Iraqi politician mused to the PRT that passions might run high, perhaps resulting in an occasional fistfight, but nothing sparking deadly violence.

Allegations of Vote Buying

¶9. (C/REL) As noted above, the PRT has received reports that some of the political parties are offering bribes to buy votes. A recent Friday prayer sermon at a local mosque aligned with Grand Ayatollah Sistani also addressed the subject, condemning the practice. According to the prevailing story, if a voter accepts payment from a party representative, he or she must swear on the Quran to vote for that party's candidates. The PRT does not know how widespread an issue this is or how much vote buying will influence the election.

Effective Leadership at the GEO

¶10. (C/REL) Strong leadership at the GEO has provided added legitimacy for the election. The young, charismatic GEO director, Mutamed Nimaa Abid al-Hassan al-Moosawi, is task-oriented and quick to resolve problems in an even-handed manner. In one recent episode, a woman working with one of the PRT-funded NGOs providing voter education out of her home in the al-Askari subdistrict was detained by Iraqi Security Forces on January 10. After release later that day, she and her husband went to discuss the incident with GEO Director Mutamed, who immediately called the local Iraqi Police general on speakerphone and resolved the situation by issuing letters to those individuals and NGOs approved to provide voter education. While only one example, the PRT has found this kind of openness and problem-solving is commonplace in the GEO.

Comment

¶11. (C/REL) With the election season in full swing, the PRT expects an election that can be described as legitimate and credible, although the allegations of vote buying are disturbing. The illiterate vote is the most pressing concern, but the GEO's solution of a separate room to help the illiterate voter is a step in the right direction. Ongoing efforts by the PRT and other organizations on voter education will also help. Finally, during the election

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process, it is hard to understate the value of the GEO director himself in legitimizing the election thus far. He has been open and transparent to any and all interested parties and will undoubtedly be a rising star in the province. End Comment.
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